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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to distill John Dewey's theory of poetic compression and suggests its possible application as a technique that the performer can use to confront poetic language. Specifically, Dewey's discussions of modes of interaction in art and of the expanding and contracting character of language are used to illuminate the language of the chorus in Shakespeare's "Henry V." (Author/KS)

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John Dewey's Interaction Theory: Its Application to the Performance of Poetry

This paper attempts to distill John Dewey's theory of poetic compression--specifically, his discussion of modes of interaction in art and the expanding and contracting character of language--and suggests its possible application as a technique the performer can use to confront poetic language, namely, for the limits of this paper, the confronting of Shakespeare's language in the Chorus from Henry V.

"Debut" Paper

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Debut #1

John Dewey's Interaction Theory: Its
Application to the Performance of Poetry

In his lecture, "The Varied Substance of the Arts," John Dewey makes this distinction between the prosaic and the poetic: "The prosaic is an affair of description and narration, of details accumulated and relations elaborated. It spreads as it goes like a legal document or catalogue. The poetic reverses the process. It condenses and abbreviates, thus giving words an energy of expansion that is almost explosive. A poem presents material so that it becomes a universe in itself, . . . There is something self-enclosed and self-limiting in a poem, and this self-sufficiency is the reason, as well as the harmony and rhythm of sounds, why poetry is, next to music, the most hypnotic of the arts."[1] (emphasis added) Aestheticians and teachers, before and after Dewey, have discussed the power of the poetic to condense, abbreviate, self-enclose, and hypnotize, and this power or energy--the magic of poetry--has intrigued thinking and feeling people for centuries. What I consider one of Dewey's special contributions to this fascinating subject--his discussion of poetic compression and the expanding and contracting character of language--seems to me an area which we in the performance of poetry should give closer attention.[2]

In this brief paper I will attempt to distill Dewey's theory of poetic compression and suggest its possible application as a technique the performer can use to confront poetic language--particularly, for the purposes of limitation, the confronting of Shakespeare's poetry.[3] I have used the word confront because one must, when all is said and done, confront the

language. "Shakespeare has embodied the thoughts and emotions of his imagined characters in an artificial structure," writes Bertram Joseph, "which nevertheless expresses feelings which are truthful and natural. The easiest way to act them truthfully and naturally is to make the poet's artificial structure the foundation of the performance."[4] Easier said than done, I should quickly add.

The greatest problem for interpreting Shakespeare, Wallace Bacon among others has said, is "the problem of the believability of the language of Shakespeare's plays."[5] Let me begin, then, with Professor Bacon's reference to "people as gesturing agents": "Literature," he says, "because it is made up of language, is an art of gesture; . . . Language, then," he continues, "has a kind of action built into it, if the reader will observe it. There is also often an action implied in words."[6] Not putting too fine a point on it, we can say that words when spoken effectively are a kind of action, especially the poetic structure of words in Shakespeare's blank verse. Dewey would certainly consider language as "word-action," for he says that the compactness of poetry gives "words an energy of expansion that is almost explosive."[7] But he goes further--in discussing the forces or energies at work in the arts--when he develops his theory of form: "In art, as in nature and life, relations are modes of interaction. They are pushes and pulls; they are contractions and expansions; they determine lightness and weight, rising and falling, harmony and discord."[8] "Interactions" operate in all the arts; in drama and fiction, whether in the epic, lyric, or dramatic modes, poetic diction happens to be the principal interaction at work.

But can we expect a performer to control and manipulate language fully if there is confusion about how "relations" or "modes of interaction"

function in poetry? Consider an obvious example of a mode of interaction: we know of the power of a writer, in fiction, to enlarge or shrink time and scene through the words in his story. The performer, having recognized this mode of interaction, adjusts his performance accordingly; but that same performer may not perceive the compression, shifting, expanding and contracting "word-actions" which operate in, for example, a twenty verse speech by a Shakespearean character--one in which "relations" are interacting with more subtlety and sophistication. A performer who sees relations in language, in Dewey's terms, is more equipped to embody the experience which the poet created.

We can observe Dewey's interactions in the Prologue of Henry V, in which the Chorus asks the pardon and invokes the imagination of the audience. The performer who understands that the Chorus makes this appeal through compact, dynamic, and highly flexible language, will be able to execute the speech primarily as a series of expanded and contracted units of expression. This thirty-four verse Prologue constitutes, formally, a series of units of experience in time and space--"or rather space-time," according to Dewey, who would see a "significant involution of time and movement in space."[9] In other words, an involution or complex involvement takes place in the language of the Chorus, and this is primarily what Dewey identifies as "relations"--"modes of interaction" in a work of art. The interactions at work in the Prologue, then, operate through a "significant involution" of what Dewey calls "directional tendencies" and "by mutual approaches and retreatings" in the experience: "They signify loosening and tightening, expanding and contracting, separating and compacting, soaring and drooping, rising and falling; the dispersive, scattering, and the hovering and brooding, unsubstantial lightness and massive blow. Such actions and reactions

are the very stuff out of which the objects and events we experience are made."[10]

These pushes and pulls, tensions and releases--which are interactions--are dynamically present in the Prologue. The speech as units divides into six phases of developing contractions/expansions, loosening/tightening and rising/falling interactions.[11] Beginning with the first unit (lines 1-8)--"O for a Muse of fire," until the Chorus breaks the unit with "But pardon, gentles all,"--the invocation immediately sets a mood of wonder and generates tensive movement; as the first four lines build, that is, expand, the Chorus attempts to invoke an extraordinary scene. (The Act I Prologue is quoted in full in addendum # 1.)

1 O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
2 The brightest heaven of invention,
3 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
4 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
5 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
6 Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
7 Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword
and fire
8 Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,

The invocation is big, dynamic, outward and upward--it is addressed to a Muse, not to the audience. The diction reinforces, indeed is an integral part of, the performer's interpretation of this expansive, rising movement, in which the fourth line ends with the exclamatory "swelling scene!" The Chorus (and performer) is "swelling" himself with the expansiveness of the invocation. The velocity, directional tendency, and diction of the next four lines amplify this sense of openness or, as Dewey suggests, the sense of lively expansion that nearly explodes in poetry; "the warlike Harry" takes on the "port" (bearing or demeanor) of Mars, the god of wars, and becomes master of the "hounds" of "famine, sword and fire." The character of feeling in the narration here is edgy, tense, pent up, partly through the

use of sibilant sounds, clusters of hissing consonants, and rapid run-on lines, so that until the eighth line the speaker expands both his vocal and physical resources. Thus the performer is responsible for, and must be capable of, embodying the interactions--the structure of push and pull, tension and relaxation, the compression and intensification of movement--which constitute this first unit of experience.

Whereas the first unit expands and intensifies, the second unit (lines 8-14) begins to contract or retreat abruptly when the Chorus suddenly acknowledges the presence of the audience (line 8). Here relations shift and this is reflected in "space-time;" the Chorus addresses the listeners intimately and conversationally, but gradually the interactions in language impel the performer to expand, tighten, and externalize his expression all over again, when a series of lofty, rhetorical questions are posed.

8 But pardon, gentles all,
9 The flat unraised spirits that have dared
10 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
11 So great an object: can this cockpit hold
12 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
13 Within this wooden O the very casques
14 That did affright the air at Agincourt?

The compression and intensification of verse continues here. It takes a mere six lines for the Chorus to shift from the intimate, measured iambs of lines 8-11, to the faster tempo and increasingly expansive quality in the series of questions which describe the imaginary scene that will occur in the cockpit and "wooden O" of the Elizabethan stage. But again the Chorus undercuts and alters the sense of time and place ("space-time"), when he repeats the apology in line 15 which begins the third unit.

In the third, fourth, and fifth units, interactions develop through the Chorus' open appeals to our imagination. The Chorus creates through a "verbal-actions" ~~approach~~, the picture of the English and French soldiers,

separated by the English Channel, with thousands of men, armour, and horses on the tiny stage. (See speech quoted in addendum # 1.) These units divide into a pattern of gradually expanding and contracting quatrains, in which the verse compresses varied experiences, images, and sensory appeals, as the Chorus asks the listeners to "Suppose" this, "Piece out" that, and "Think" what is talked about is seen. Near the end of the Prologue, in the sixth unit, the Chorus presents this very challenge of temporal compression and sets the tone for this and later addresses: "For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,/Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,/Turning the accomplishment of many years/Into an hour-glass." The Chorus is at once distilling time and using highly compact language with which to do it.[12] It is no accident that I have chosen the Chorus in Henry V as an illustration of Dewey's interactional theory, for such heroic epic drama, with the controlling influence of a Chorus-narrator, imposes demands on the performer that are very challenging.

While a merely random choice of speeches from Shakespeare or from other poetry might result in a rather pedantic, tedious exercise in the application of Dewey's interactions theory, I would see some benefit from the kind of partial explication I have attempted as a means of access for performing more complex speeches from Shakespeare and from poetry in general. A performer is always faced with the problem of internalizing or externalizing poetic passages; the changing perceptions of time and scene as reflected in Dewey's notion of expanding and contracting language, can help the performer recognize and sort out these interactional signs in the compressed language in order to achieve a proper intensity of experience in the poetry.

Footnotes

[1]John Dewey, "The Varied Substance of the Arts," Art As Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 241. Dewey says: "While there is no difference that may be exactly defined between prose and poetry, there is a gulf between the prosaic and poetic as extreme limiting terms of tendencies in experience. One of them realizes the power of words to express what is in heaven and earth and under the seas by means of extension; the other by intension." Dewey, p. 241.

[2]That is, most of our classroom textbooks in interpretation refer to the broad notion of time in poetry and prose, but what is usually neglected or notably absent is discussion or analysis about how the recognition of compression in language can be applied as a technique for performance.

[3]In the addenda to this paper, I have sketched out Performance Manuscripts in which are selected passages from two different modes of Shakespeare's work, each with its special stylistic problems for the performer: (1) Narrative, using the Chorus from Henry V; (2) Dramatic, using the character of Edmund from King Lear. (A third mode, the Lyric, using a Shakespeare sonnet, might provide us with a different but useful perspective of Dewey's theory, if space were available to explicate such a personal, internalized form, but this is not possible in the present paper.) These Performance Manuscripts are intentionally sketchy because a more detailed preparation would tend to be confusing on paper. A clearer recognition of Dewey's interaction theory would require the give and take, trial and error of the live performer rehearsing with a director.

[4]Bertram Joseph, Acting Shakespeare (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1960), p. 53.

[5]Wallace A. Bacon, "Problems in the Interpretation of Shakespeare," The Speech Teacher, XXII, No. 4 (November 1973), 273.

[6]Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 17-18.

[7]Dewey, p. 241.

[8]Dewey, "The Natural History of Form," Art As Experience, p. 134.

[9]Dewey, "The Common Substance of the Arts," Art As Experience, pp. 206-07. For Dewey, "space-time" is "infinitely diversified in qualities. We can reduce the diversification to three general themes: Room, Extent, Position--Spaciousness, Spatiality, Spacing--or in terms of time--transition, endurance and date." pp. 208-09. After discussing how these qualities of "space-time" interact, Dewey says that "time as an entity does not exist. What exists are things acting and changing, and a constant quality of their behavior is temporal." p. 210.

[10]Dewey, p. 207.

[11]We can begin to see that while these units are what the actor might call "builds" or, in Stanislavkian terms, the "beats"--a series of intentions in a speech--Dewey's interactional approach will give us, perhaps, a more explicit perception and explication of language in each unit.

[12]The power of the performer as narrator, chorus, or character to alter time and events through the appropriate manipulation of language, using Dewey's interactional theory, obviously affects our perceptions of what and how we experience a work. When we experience a series of temporal events being turned into a "hour-glass," we are witnessing a dramatist's use of

what E. M. Forster refers to as the novelist's "power to expand and contract perception [as] one of the great advantages of the novel-form, . . ."
E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1927), p. 81.

Addendum #1

Chorus, Act I Prologue, Henry V:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword
and fire
Crouch for employment.[1] But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?[2]
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.[3]
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:[4]
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;

Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth; 5/
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play. 6/

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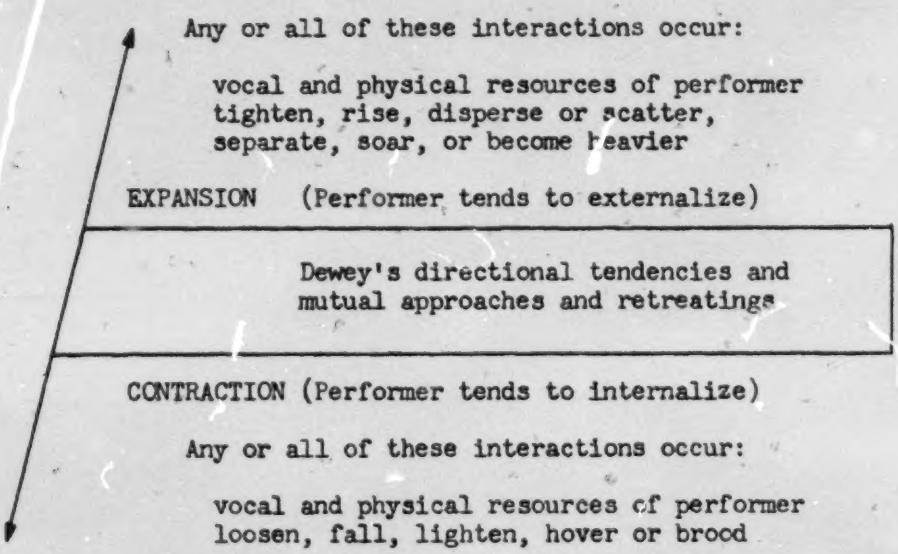
KEY TO MANUSCRIPTS:


Any or all of these interactions occur:
vocal and physical resources of performer tighten, rise, disperse or scatter, separate, soar, or become heavier
EXPANSION (Performer tends to externalize)
Dewey's directional tendencies and mutual approaches and retreatings
CONTRACTION (Performer tends to internalize)
Any or all of these interactions occur:
vocal and physical resources of performer loosen, fall, lighten, hover or brood

[ ] #/ Means: Shift in Interaction and beginning of new unit (i.e. change in directional tendency or change in approach and retreat)

Addendum # 2

Edmund, Act I, scene 2, King Lear:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound.[1] Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?[2]
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?[3]
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake?[4] Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: fine word,--legitimate![5]
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate.[6] I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!